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P-Hochhuth, Rolf

Hochhuth's *Coup d'Etat* (U.S.)

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Secretly Guerrillas  
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Original under Eckstein

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Mr. Eckstein contributes regularly to several German periodicals; his book on the New Left in America is being brought out this month by a German publisher.

Rolf Hochhuth has made his name by stepping on mighty toes. In his historical-political plays he has attacked prominent persons and myths, basing his dialogue on historical documents and frequently using their actual texts. However, he does so not in the manner of the modern "documentary theatre" but remains rather in the tradition of the German historical dramatic theatre, the tradition of Schiller, of Büchner, and—in our time—Carl Zuckmayer. He brings to this tradition an extra sharpness, a pointing up of the issues, rather than of the individuals in whom they have come to be incorporated.

His *Deputy*, written in 1963 and shown on Broadway amidst considerable controversy, attacked Pope Pius XII for not having raised his voice and his influence against Hitler's extermination of the Jews. In *Soldiers* (1967) he poked into another dark episode of World War II—the death of General Sikorski, head of the Polish Government-in-Exile, in an unusual plane accident off Gibraltar. In slightly veiled hints, he laid the responsibility for this "accident" to Winston Churchill, and to his and Stalin's postwar goals, which had no room for a quixotic leader who would not give up the dream of a truly independent Poland.

It is quite understandable that a dramatist should be attracted to the dark side of history—it promises more effective theatre than the drudgery of daily politics or the slow changes in power relations and institutions. But this preoccupation is hazardous when it turns from historical event, however recent, to current politics and speculation about its potentialities. That is what Hochhuth has done in his latest play, *Guerrillas*, a "tragedy" set in the United States of about 1968, and dealing with the social and political tendencies of what Hochhuth sees as the American Empire. *Guerrillas* has recently been performed in Stuttgart and other German cities, and been published by Rowohlt Verlag, Hamburg.

As a citizen of what he calls an American "satellite state whose industry is bit by bit swallowed up by U.S. corporations," Hochhuth feels entitled to place his urban guerrilla revolution in the epicenter of power, the United States itself. He puts secondary emphasis on Latin America, which he sees as the

Empire's most vulnerable flank, now that the rebellion of the poor masses there is spreading to the church and parts of the upper classes, including the army officers.

Starting from the premise that the military-industrial complex which is ruling the United States and dominates Latin America cannot be destroyed except by a revolution from above, a group of dissenters from the ruling elite have built up a guerrilla network. Their leader is Senator Nicolson, son of a prominent Catholic member of the DAR, head of a shipyard and airplane company working for the military, former Marine officer and pilot, CIA official, key adviser to the President on anti-guerrilla warfare, and member of a prominent New York law firm. The clandestine guerrilla organization, in concert with black workers and engineers, has penetrated the highest power centers of the nation and is preparing a *coup d'etat* in which the Administration, under threat of nuclear rockets from a cooperating Polaris submarine commander and a code officer in the Pentagon's computer center, will be forced to institute those changes in the laws and institutions which are necessary to bring about about the long overdue "social revolution every twenty years" which Hochhuth quotes Thomas Jefferson as having advocated.

The peculiar character of the revolutionary program (to be instituted by fiat) is perhaps best expressed in the first and last of its seven points, as proclaimed by one of the conspirators, a TV commentator with some resemblance to Walter Lippmann:

"The founding of an American workers' party.

"The exile of 'the leading man and his eldest son or heir from among the 200 families owning 90 per cent of the land and means of production.'"

One of the romantic incidents of the play is a debutante ball in Los Angeles, well patronized by the daughters of the business and political elite (thanks to the unwitting help of the mother DAR), which is to supply the conspirators with valuable hostages. Lovers of revolutionary mayhem are well served by a number of cloak-and-dagger episodes on stage: from the gassing of an unwelcome witness, to electronic eavesdropping and discreet violence in a Guatemalan cathedral, and finally to the killing of the protagonist in the office of his law firm by a CIA official, a friend from Marine Corps days.

More to the point, perhaps, and closer to political reality, is the sense of doom and carelessness which hangs over the affair. It lends an air of absurdity to the meticulous attention to detail, and implies a hidden wish not to succeed that one can detect among the conspirators against Hitler, as well as among the Black Panthers (who call it "revolutionary suicide"). Thus the sideline involvement of Senator Nicolson, and of his beautiful Latin wife, in the Latin American guerrilla network leads to their detection and liquidation. At the play's end the question is left open whether Nicolson's black deputy, whose cover job is to be the Senator's pilot, will be able to take over the command of the as yet undetected domestic operation.

In his preface—like Bernard Shaw's prefaces it is an integral part of the play, as are also the explanatory notes preceding many of the individual scenes—Hochhuth makes some valid remarks on the political theatre. "Political theatre cannot have the task of reproducing reality—which is always political—but of confronting it with the projection of a new reality. . . . Too many plays attempt to copy events; this play tries to prefigure one. . . . This drama uses the current and temporary New York establishment as a building shell—a shell acquired for wrecking—in order to fill it with revolutionary spirit and to make transparent its façades. In this process, reality has been refined to its symbolic values. . . ."

One may concede to Hochhuth the poet's right to "refine" reality; still, if his play is to strike us as more than a thrilling dramatic experience, it must connect with our own experience of that reality. The success and failure of *Guerrillas* have their source here. I shall speak first and in more detail of the failure, because its reasons are more important and more profound, and have an applicability well beyond Hochhuth and his play. Some of the failings are obviously connected with simple ignorance of American facts; thus we may be willing to accept a central character who combines the leadership of a secret guerrilla organization with any one of the other roles assigned to Nicolson; but in the United States no one can at the same time be a Senator, a high-ranking CIA official, the head of a policy-making agency and the active head of an enterprise building submarines and war planes. And if Hochhuth wants us to accept Nicolson as the symbol of the interlocking military-industrial-political